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Yankees in Memphis

Following Van Dorn's devastating raid on Grant's supply base at Holly Springs on December 20, 1862, the Union army was compelled to relinquish the occupation of northern Mississippi and retreat to the vicinity of Memphis. While a new campaign against Vicksburg was being organized, the soldiers enjoyed a few days of relaxation — according to the diary of a private in the Sixteenth Iowa Infantry. —
THE EDITOR.

Our first experience at Memphis was not delightful. On our second day there a heavy rain set in and lasted until midnight. Then the weather turned suddenly cold, and by morning a foot of snow fell. Our threadbare tents failed to keep out the chill breezes, and any allusion to the Sunny South awoke sardonic blasphemy.

We would no doubt have suffered severely but for the happy fact that our division, the Sixth in the Army of the Tennessee, was paid off in the afternoon, and a general stampede for the city ensued. All discipline was gone. Even sentries left

their beats, shoved their muskets under tents, and went off in the universal hegira. This may seem an extravagant statement, but I heard of many such cases, and knew of some in my own regiment. The officers cared nothing for it, and were as anxious to get to town as we were. A thousand cavalry led by a man like Earl Van Dorn, could have easily captured the camps of our whole division — arms, artillery, and all.

Every man of us had in his pocket what to him was an ample fortune. Having been over so large a part of the Confederacy, fought battles, waded rivers, starved, thirsted, roasted, suffered, and frozen, we were now moved by a unanimous desire to sleep in a feather bed once or twice, have something nice to eat, and otherwise participate in the blessings of civilized life. Some of the older ones among us also thought they would like to have something to drink.

We soon reached the business center of the city, and a saturnalia began. The streets were alive with boys in blue — by thousands — and, ere long, Southern whisky bore luxuriant fruit. All ways of getting rid of money were utilized impartially. Gambling, drinking, feasting, reveling with Free Companions — speedily put Uncle Sam's greenbacks in circulation. Though the Memphians did not love us, they loved our money. It

bore the hated brand of the "Lincoln despotism", but plenty of people were glad to get it. Saloons, occasionally, were thrown out on the sidewalk, with many breakages, and the pantaloons and coats that danced on hooks in front of clothing stores often flew heavenward or formed impromptu carpeting for the passing crowds to walk on. If a soldier was arrested for riotousness, he was immediately rescued by other soldiers.

Many funny things occurred. One unsophisticated veteran bought a pair of boots, but had walked only a short distance in them when they got wet and came to pieces. They had been merely pasted or cemented together. Filled with ire, he went back to the dealer, demanding justice or blood.

"Mine frent", the merchant explained, handing back the money, "you should not have valked in dose poots. Dose are cafalry poots, and are yust made to ride in."

A small party of us took rooms at a nice hotel, had hot baths, arrayed ourselves in "boiled shirts", paper collars and neckties, and sallied forth to see the sights. The officers of our division, we observed, had imitated the example of the men, and were also bent on a sportive time. A fine brass band in Jackson Square discoursed free music. Toward evening the fun became fast and furious,

and the military officials of the city filed a complaint with General John McArthur, our commander. He gave little attention to their grievances, however, replying that we had seen rough times in the interior, and he thought, as long as we paid for what we got, a little frolic wouldn't hurt us.

I attended a theatre in the evening. The audience was composed almost entirely of officers and soldiers, seated promiscuously together. I saw a grizzly old colonel contentedly taking in the play, seated in the midst of jolly young soldiers. A pretty woman came out to the footlights and sang the "Star Spangled Banner", which, of course, awoke tumultuous applause. In the progress of the play, a ludicrous circumstance occurred. While the heroine was weeping before an incorrigible villain, and imploring him to grant some earnest request, a cavalryman with his brains fuddled with whisky took the whole scene to be real. Leaping on the stage he drew his six-shooter, cocked it, and would have made short work with the villain but for the latter's quick exit. The audience roared and applauded. With a defiant air the trooper replaced his weapon, and was about to draw the weeping heroine to his protective embrace when half a dozen of his comrades collared him and with great difficulty persuaded him that

the battle was over and that his presence on the stage was no longer necessary.

A Confederate officer was in the audience that evening. He described the incident as follows: "The play was 'Robert Macaire', and there was a fresh, hearty young Yankee in the pit who was under the influence of liquor. He took the whole thing for solemn fact, and in the scene where the Captain seizes a young girl to take her away forcibly, and the pretty actress shrieks, the Yankee sprang up to the footlight, whipped out his revolver and shouted at the top of his voice: 'Drop her, old fellow! Drop the gal, or I'll blow Hell out of you in a second!' Old Ben de Bar took in the situation instantly, and did 'drop the gal', whereupon the Yankee said kindly: 'Don't you cry, miss. He shan't hurt you! Whenever a gal's in trouble, just let her holler for the Second Cavalry!' The Yankee brought down the house."

Presenting stage heroics to such an audience was an easy path to dramatic eminence. Most of my companions were versed in the drama as little as myself. And yet we had borne parts in dramas on which the gaze of the world had been centered. This Memphis theatre was the first I had ever been in. Soft, voluptuous music, the glare of the footlights, stage illusions, and other scenic effects opened to me a new and bewildering field of splen-

dor. On the following evening, at the same theatre, I saw General Grant, Mrs. Grant, General Rawlins, one or two other generals, and some staff officers in one of the boxes.

The news that our stay in Tennessee was to be only temporary and that steamers would bear us southward soon excited the hopes and raised the spirits of all. The weather became genial and we gradually wandered back to camp, leaving a large amount of money in the tills of Memphis. Several soldiers had been shot at, under cover of darkness.

On the morning of January 18, 1863, the drums of our division beat to arms, and the order to strike tents was given. Cheer after cheer pealed through our spacious camps, and in half an hour the various brigades were marching into the city, with colors unfurled and all bands playing. Still another division was in motion also, and after a display of unusual pomp, which drew crowds of people to the sidewalks, we stacked arms along the levee while baggage of every kind was being transferred to a fleet of steamers. A multitude of sentinels were posted to keep the men from drifting back into the city to get "just one more drink".

It was night before we embarked. Twelve large steamers were loaded with twenty-four regiments and many batteries. The accommodations were somewhat insufficient, and we stowed our-

selves away in all sorts of places regardless of company or any other distinctions. I slept that night on the hurricane deck. At about twelve o'clock a heavy rain storm arose, drenching me and a party of companions to the skin. A work of several hours in the morning was necessary to dry our clothing and effects.

Not liking our perch on the roof, we picked up our knapsacks and walked into the cabin of the boat. A remonstrance was made, which met with a counter remonstrance, and we denounced the selfishness of assigning a large cabin for officers to play poker in while their soldiers were quartered on a rain-swept roof above. Other men poured in behind us, and with democratic equality officers and soldiers occupied the cabin together, for the boat was very crowded. We remained at the wharf all day on the 19th, but guards at every possible point of egress kept us on board.

The sutlers of the army found all previous calculations deranged by recent military movements, and thousands of dollars' worth of expensive goods were stacked and piled along the levee, much consisting of wines and liquors for the officers. We entertained no very amiable feelings for sutlers. They charged us four prices for everything we bought, and had an almost complete monopoly of our trade. Their goods on the wharf

were strongly guarded, but the sentinels were like so many blind men. I saw two fellows pick up a barrel of butter from almost under a sentry's nose, and carry it past other guards and on board our transport. It was placed on the hurricane deck, the head of the barrel was knocked in, and there was "free butter for all" as long as it lasted.

Weighty suggestions began to fall on willing ears, and that evening, as soon as darkness came, a grand raid was made on the sutler goods. The transport guards allowed jayhawkers to pass both ways with impunity. The sentinels on the levee saw nothing whatever, and in two hours every command was abundantly supplied with all imaginable luxuries. Liquor was so plentiful on our steamer that a general "jamboree" ensued. An effort was afterward made to have the value of these goods deducted from the pay of our division, but the scheme failed.

At noon on the 20th our grand fleet swung from its moorings. In skies of blue the sun shone with friendly brilliancy. Banners waved on winds as soft as those of summer. Steamer after steamer turned its prow to the South. The wildest cheers filled the air, drowning the clamor of our martial music. "Ho! for Vicksburg!" was the cry, and we believed we could take the impregnable city.

CLINT PARKHURST